

Books

We can and must have an African Christianity

The World in Between. Christian healing and the struggle for spiritual survival

Emmanuel Milingo

C. Hurst, £7.95; £3.95 paperback

This is no ordinary book. The thoughts and feelings of Emmanuel Milingo, the controversial former Archbishop of Lusaka, are here presented as logically and starkly as possible in excerpts from 13 of his pamphlets and booklets. Mona Macmillan has done a good editorial job, supplying actual background information, introducing the various sections, editing them for better readability and commenting on their importance. She succeeds in what she attempts to do: to make the bishop speak for himself to the ill-informed Westerners we are.

The heart of the matter is the dialogue, or the lack of it, between Africa and its Christian godparents from the West. For Milingo is as much African as he is undoubtedly Christian. His anguished indictment is that white missionaries do not allow Christian Africans to be true to themselves. "Our traditions must be reshaped to suit the Western mind before they can be accepted as worth preserving." There are examples to document this lack of true inculturation. They cover all aspects of Christian life: liturgy and art, music, church structures, pastoral ministries, spirituality and even the presentation of doctrine.

This is the real area of concern. "The Milingo case" is clouded by so many other unsettling questions. Who orchestrated the anti-Milingo smear campaign, the allegations of financial mismanagement and sexual misdemeanour which subsequently were proved absolutely false? What role did his fellow bishops play, or the pronuncio, in the censures imposed on him by the Vatican? Was the press in Zambia politically motivated when it maligned Milingo; and did the Vatican condone these political machinations when it exiled him to Rome? Does the treatment meted out to Archbishop Milingo reflect Vatican disdain for charismatic healing, as has sometimes been alleged? All these are legitimate questions, which may well be raised on their own merit. It is not every day that an archbishop is summoned to Rome and asked to resign. But none of these questions, in my view, is as significant as the "African" issue.

Indeed, Milingo entertains some strange concepts; strange, that is, for our traditional, Western way of looking on reality. Milingo is convinced that the world of spirits is real. These spirits are both our

ancestors who are alive with God and now possess ethereal powers, and evil spirits ruled by the devil. Milingo claims he can communicate with these spirits. He narrates how on one occasion he talked to the spirit of a deceased person shortly after the funeral. The dead person in question thanked him for having hurried to her bedside and for having given her absolution, even though she had already died.

On many occasions, he tells us, he talked to the evil spirits possessing the sick. In a typical discussion with the evil spirits he will find out how many they are, what their names are, how long they have been in the possessed person, where in the person's body they have taken up their residence and what kind of disease they are causing. The bishop claims that he can speak about good and evil spirits in this way because he knows them from his own experience. He has heard them speak. He has seen the suffering they caused. He has driven them out by the power of Jesus. It is through such beliefs that Milingo clashes with our modern Western view of the world. Spirits do not exist, we maintain. Fear of them springs from superstition. The so-called possessed are suffering from psychosomatic diseases. And we conclude that the archbishop must therefore be talking nonsense.

Milingo rightly protests against this judgement. Who are we in the West to dictate what is real and what is not? The diseases people suffer from, even if they are psychologically nourished, as Milingo admits, are real enough. The influence of parents, grandparents and senior relatives, whether dead or alive, cannot be denied. Moreover, the cultural conviction that the spirits of the ancestors remain active produces a psychological reality of its own, whatever its actual source may be.

The most we can say in all honesty is that spirits no longer play such a major role in our Western experience. Africans may rightly pit their own experience against ours. "We Africans have been communing with our dead ancestors from time beyond reckoning." Yes, it is even a mark of identity. "We are what we are because our society still has something special: we can speak with the dead." What can Europe say against this with its own long history of belief in angels and guardian angels, witches and werewolves, legendary patron saints and will-o'-the-wisps?

Milingo does not ask us to abandon our idiosyncracies. He asks us to allow the African Church to be Christian in her own African way. He is convinced that the African Church can do this, within her own experience, without either distorting the Gospel message or being disloyal to Christian tradition. In all the excerpts published in the book, no single statement by Milingo could be styled unorthodox. His approach is spiritual throughout, and theologically conservative. He has no intention of in-

venting a new doctrine or forming a break-away Church. But he refuses to deny his African origins. "Don't tell me I need to embrace European civilisation and culture to be a full Christian. It would be like forcing me to change my nature. It would imply that God made a mistake by creating me an African. It would belie my mother's experience who never felt that by leading an African life she missed something."

The book is no systematic treatise on African theology. But here and there interesting glimpses are shown of what an African theology might look like. A different concept of God is called for. Africans find our Western God, who resides in Heaven and whom we only meet in church, a distant god. "He is far from the people. The African traditional God is one who walks with them, and whom they consult any time a need arises. It is the God who lives with them. . . . This is the God we need in Africa." Jesus fits well in African concepts if he is considered as the main ancestor, the one most powerful, most capable of liberating us from all evil. "Until people see the role of Jesus as being in the hierarchy of the spirit-world, that is of our ancestors, it will be hard to uproot them completely from their beliefs. Jesus deserves the complete commitment to him of the human race; he is truly the Elder of the human family, 'the first-born of them all'."

Milingo may not succeed in convincing us of his spirit-world; he may overstate his grievances. But he deserves to be listened to, both as a Father of his people and a believing African. I am appalled to learn that at his summons to Rome he was only granted an audience with the Pope after 18 months. Will we allow Africa to speak?

John Wijngaards

Interpreter extraordinary

Plain Truth for Plain People

William Barclay: The

Authorised Biography

Clive L. Rawlins

Eerdmans/Paternoster, £19.95

The academic world finds it hard to be generous to a scholar who breaks through to a mass audience. Professor William Barclay (1907-1978) did for the New Testament what John Kenyon held that Sir Arthur Bryant did for history, namely, "took (it) out to a wider audience than anyone since Macaulay". Barclay's resultant popularity was counterbalanced by the sneers of some of the *cognoscenti*, who dismissed him as "that Annie S. Swarf (an early Agony Aunt) of theology" or "a sort of theological Marshall McLuhan".

Clive Rawlins's ample life gives the lie to such glib pejoratives. Admittedly Barclay's academic career was anything but meteoric. Appointed to a New Testament lectureship at Glasgow at 39, he had to wait 17 years for his chair, and that was grudgingly granted. He lacked Hebrew and Aramaic, and admitted he was "no theolo-